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BALLAD AND DANCE

The last decade has done much toward clearing up hazy notions regarding the origins of the popular ballad. In this work an important part has been played by Professor Louise Pound, who in a series of able articles dispersed among various American philological journals, has contributed greatly toward bringing the subject out into clear daylight. In her latest contribution to the subject, however, that in the September issue of the *PMLA*, in questioning the relation of the ballad-form to dancing-custom, Miss Pound takes a position which, in my opinion, is not defensible. The views presented in her paper challenge full discussion, and I should like to offer, from the notes that I have been able to assemble on this subject in the last few years, a few arguments in support of the prevalent opinion that the distinctive features of the popular ballad reflect features of medieval dancing.

Regarding the history of the word 'ballad' as evidence in point, Miss Pound makes a clear case. Let me add that the history of the word 'carol' offers an interesting analogy. Originally the name of a circle-dance, the name 'carol' became shifted to the song connected with the dance, and then, by generalization, to joyous songs in general, and then, by specialization in turn, to the joyous songs of the Christmas season. Although in one or two instances the form of popular Christmas carols seems to be connected with older dancing custom, it would be obviously impossible to connect the Christmas carol in general, more usually of hymnal or pagan festival origin, with the medieval *carole*-dance. In the same way the word 'ballad,' originally meaning a song for dance accompaniment, by the sixteenth century, while still¹ sometimes used in its earlier meaning, had become generalized so as to apply to songs of most varied type. Only in the

¹ *Servant*. O master, if you did not but hear the pedler at the door, you would never dance again after a tabor and pipe; no, the bagpipe could not move you; he sings several tunes faster than you'll tell money; he utters them as he had eaten ballads, and al men's ears grew to his tunes.—*Winter's Tale*, III, sc. 3.

eighteenth century, as Miss Pound has pointed out, did it become, somewhat arbitrarily, restricted to use as the name for one form of traditional narrative song.

In her consideration of the songs used as accompaniment to the medieval ring-dance in England called the '*carole*,' Miss Pound has shown that these were prevailingly lyrical rather than narrative in character. To the evidence cited by Miss Pound may well be added that of the "foolish song" sung for Touchstone by the two pages in *As You Like It*, for which the popular type of carol-songs used for dance-accompaniment seem to have offered a pattern. The "ditty" *It was a lover and his lass*, with its refrains, its reference to "the only pretty ring time," and its application to itself of the name "carol" may then be cited as evidence regarding the nature of the popular songs accompanying the carol-dance in the latest stage, and indicates a lyrical form.

Not only the songs of the medieval ring-dances, but those accompanying Children's ring-games surviving in our times, in which, rather than in the Child ballads, Miss Pound sees the relics of the older dances with song-accompaniment, she points out, have in them, in general, little of the narrative element.

Thus far one can hardly dissent from the views expressed by Miss Pound. It should be noted, however, that the conclusions reached, are negative in character. The usually accepted explanation of ballad-creation is discarded, but there is offered no alternative. Let us see, then, if something cannot be said in support of the prevalent theory.

In the first place, to dissociate the popular ballad in its origin from the old dancing custom, is to do away with the most plausible explanation for those qualities that distinguish the ballads of the Child canon from other forms of popular song. The objectivity, so marked a quality of the Child ballad, finds a satisfactory explanation in the conditions of choral origin. The elemental quality of the emotions dealt with, likewise, is of the kind suited for expression in choral dance. The ballad common-places also, the well-worn phraseology, the oft-used ornamental details of opening verses and of conclusions, indicate choral improvisation rather than more deliberate invention. The 'incremental repetition' so much stressed by Professor Gummere, although by no means an exclusive property of the popular ballad, nevertheless affording as it does, opportunity for lingering over certain situations, suits the char-

acter of the dancing ring. Above all, the refrains, persisting in so many ballad versions, even in versions recorded from the singing of soloists, afford indication which may not be disregarded, that at one time a chorus had its share in the song.

Such *à priori* considerations, briefly stated, afford sufficient reason for not lightly discarding the only plausible explanation available for the much-discussed features of the popular ballad. Let us now review the known facts regarding the use of narrative in the medieval choral dance. Did narrative form no part of the choral songs? Granted the prevalence of lyric themes, are there no instances where the subject matter was narrative?

The widely-circulated story of the Dancers of Kolbigk may be cited as evidence in point. To this diverting tale of the twelve young people who by curse were condemned to dance perpetually because of their sacrilege in disturbing the service in the churchyard on Christmas night, we are indebted for many concrete details which help form a picture of the *carole* dance. Most important for the present purpose is the Latin version of one of the stanzas of the song accompaniment and of the refrain:

Equitabat Bevo per silvam,
Ducebat secum Merswyndam formosam.
Quid stamus, cur non imus?

There is to be noted not only the refrain and the use of a stanza-form typical of the popular ballad, but the narrative character of the subject-matter. The story-setting, to be sure, is not English, but it is told by Robert of Brunne, an English writer, who finds in the details nothing to comment on as other than typical use.

Unmistakable references to the use of narrative as theme for dance song in England are none too numerous. The exploits of Hereward,² we are told, "were sung by the women and maidens in their dance," and from the twelfth century has been recorded what is probably the burden or chorus of a song of Cnut³ "sung in these days by people in their dances." Much later, in the sixteenth century "Complaynt of Scotland," we have an account of the merry-making of shepherds with tales and songs and ring-

² Gummere, *The Popular Ballad*, p. 49.

³ See article by Miss Pound (*Mod. Lang. Notes*, xxxiv, 162-5) in which the validity of this instance is brought into question.

dancing. The subjects of the dance songs are prevailingly lyrical, but at least one, *Ihonne ermistrangis dance*, and possibly a second, the dance of *Robene hude*, may have handled narrative subjects in ballad fashion.⁴

Furthermore in the art poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we have indirect evidence of the existence of popular models in the form of narrative song with refrain. Just as in Shakespeare's *It was a lover and his lass*, we have reflected the form and spirit of the lyrical accompaniment to the popular carol dance, have we not a reflection of the popular narrative dance form in that art carol of mystical beauty with the refrain, "The faucon hath borne my make away"?⁵ Is not a traditional popular narrative choral song, also, to be assumed as the pattern for the art song by William Cornish in two-line stanzas beginning:⁶

The knight knocked at the castle gate;
The lady marvelled who was thereat.

with the lyrical refrain:

You and I and Amyas
Amyas and you and I,
To the greenwood must we go, alas!
You and I, my life, and Amyas?

The early evidence of narrative dance songs in England, it must be admitted, is none too abundant. In France so far as present knowledge⁷ goes, songs of this type did not exist before the end of the fifteenth century. It is to Scandinavian countries that one must turn for most convincing evidence.

In most Scandinavian countries the prevalent use of narrative songs for dance-accompaniment in the later middle ages is admitted by everyone, Miss Pound included. A not unlikely hypothesis⁸ is that the *Carole* dance-custom was imported from France, possibly by the way of England, into Scandinavian countries and there connected with narrative themes. The marked similarity between the Danish *Folkeviser*, admittedly once used as dance

⁴ Cf. Miss Pound's discussion of these dance songs in her article, pages 396-7.

⁵ Chambers and Sidgwick, *Early English Lyrics*, p. 145.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷ A. Beattie, *PMLA.*, xxix, p. 493. Quoted from G. Paris.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 492.

accompaniment, and the English Child ballads, both in narrative themes and in metrical form, is such that it is hard to see how one can hesitate to accept the known explanations of the one as applicable to the other.

One may be disposed to agree with Miss Pound that "As to origins, the Danish ballads do not help the communalists," but for the association of the ballad-form with the dance, the evidence of the Danish ballads is incontrovertible. The statement that the dancing to these Danish ballads was that of "the high born," is misleading. According to Olrik ⁹ 'the producers of these songs were the Danish nobility, *but* not a small number of noble families who later built the lordly castles; rather a nobility distributed over thousands of farmsteads, who later sank back into the rank of peasants.'

Once prevalent, not only in Denmark but also in Norway, these dances to narrative songs went out of fashion in Denmark in the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Among the isolated Scandinavian population of the Faroe Islands, however, they have persisted down to our own time. Miss Pound, in a footnote, quotes the remark of Gummere that "the ballad genesis is more plainly proved for the Faroes than any other modern people." In spite of the importance evidently to be attached to the evidence of the Faroe dances, her handling here is entirely inadequate. In a footnote appears the statement that: "The whole matter of Faroe folk song was cleared satisfactorily by Thuren in his *Folke Saangen paa Færøerne*, 1908." In spite of this reference, she makes no use of the invaluable information offered by this remarkable book. In fact, on page 390 appears the statement that "the Faroe fisherman pieces are sung to hymn tunes or to familiar airs, not to invented melodies, or to traditional melodies — not at least to melodies traditional from ancient times," whereas in fact about one-half of Thuren's book is devoted to the recording and discussion of the native music of the Faroe Island songs. One of his conclusions is that ¹¹ "it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Faroe system of melody developed on the islands." He traces the development from "Recitativ" to the gapped five-tone, or Pentatonic scales and

⁹ A. Olrik, *Danske Folkeviser i Udvalg*. 3d ed. Copenhagen, 1913, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹¹ Hjalmar Thuren, *Folkesangen paa Færøerne*, København, 1908, p. 226.

remarks that the transition from Recitativ to the Pentatonic forms is so natural, and the tone groups used are so simple, that one may well consider himself in the presence of the same phase of development that is frequently met with in the history of primitive song.

Thuren, in his book, establishes the identity between the Faroe dances, with their dance leader, their sinuous curves, and their distinctive dance movement, and the medieval *carole* dance as we know it from detailed description of it under its later name, *branle*, in sixteenth-century books on dancing. Here then, transported, to be sure, to a new environment, but as so often in the case of transported customs, preserving its original character better than in the home of its creation, we have surviving the popular dancing custom which is believed to have given its impress to the form of the popular ballad.

The contrast between Faroe and Danish versions of the same ballad is interesting. In the Danish songs, which have been divorced from dancing, Thuren points out the shortening of the refrain. He also points out the development of the verse melodies since the form of the verse is no longer held in fixed rhythm by the accompanying dance. This comparison offers interesting suggestions regarding what we must assume to have taken place in England when the songs were separated from the dance.

In the Faroe dances the narrative subjects are not usually new stories, but well-known stories of great variety. Among them are included the old story of Sigurd Fafnersbane, that of the Faroe national hero, Sigmund Bretteson, tales of Roland, of Tristram, of Olufa, the daughter of Pippin, a great variety of isolated romantic tales, songs imported from Denmark and stories of church celebrities, of St. James, of St. Nicholas, even of the Virgin Mary.

The dancers enter into the entertainment with zest. They show their interest in the subject of the narrative by accompanying gesture, and in the refrain give full expression to the feelings, joyous or sad, aroused by the story. Contrary to what one might suppose, the stories handled in this way are not short ones. Here, if one will reflect, are the conditions under which an active person would best enjoy a story. To the island fisherman, the enjoyment of the narrative would be enhanced because of the opportunity afforded for active expression of the feeling aroused by the story.

Tending at the present time to die out in the Faroe Islands,

these dances are receiving artificial support and recently have been re-introduced into Norway, a work for which credit is due to the zealous effort of Hulda Garborg. In the summer of 1913 I personally had the pleasure of seeing some of these dances as performed by the young people of Ulvik in Norway. From this experience dates my first vivid realization of the connection between the song-dance and the ballad-form. Fru Garborg has been also active in introducing these narrative song dances into Sweden and Denmark and reports¹² that from under her instruction Fräulein Gertrud Meyer has recently introduced these dances into Germany and an American woman (unnamed) has introduced them into America.

If the medieval ring-dance was once accompanied by narrative songs, it is remarkable if among the ring-games of the children, the song accompaniments of which, as has been shown above, are prevaillingly lyrical, there are to be found no traces of narrative songs. As a matter of fact such traces do exist. Miss Pound herself cites from W. W. Newell a reference to the use of *Barbara Allen* in 'play party' games in the early part of the nineteenth century in New England. Professor Child, as well as Gilchrist and Broadwood, are cited by her in evidence that *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* "has known game-song usage." Further she cites from Nebraska a version of *The Two Sisters* 'that has been used as a dance-song.' To these instances of ballad words combined with dance, let me add other instances of a similar kind. Professor C. A. Smith¹³ cites an account of a highly diverting dramatic version of *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* among southern negroes. S. Baring-Gould¹⁴ says of a Cornish version of *The Elfin Knight*, "This used to be sung as a sort of game in farm-houses between a young man who went outside the room and a girl who sat on the settle or a chair and a sort of chorus of farm lads and lasses." *Andrew Lammie* "used in former times to be presented in dramatic shape at rustic weddings in Aberdeenshire."¹⁵ The Swedish version of *Willie's Lyke-Wake* is said to be often represented as a drama by young people in country-

¹² Hulda Garborg. *Songdansen i Nordlandi*, Christiania, 1913.

¹³ *Musical Quarterly*, II, 12.

¹⁴ Cited by C. R. Baskerville, *Mod. Phil.*, XIV, 498, from Child, IV, 439.

¹⁵ Chambers, quoted by Gummere, *The Popular Ballad*, p. 107.

places.”¹⁶ Of the story of *Our Goodman* we are told that it is sung in several parts of France as a little drama. *Dugald Quin* as Professor Gummere¹⁷ has pointed out, is very near to choral song. Another little ballad drama is the little Orkney Island *Play of the Lathie Odivere*¹⁸ of which the ballad original has not survived.

Among ballads outside the Child collection, ballads for which no connection with the choral dance can be claimed, there are a number that were presented in the form of song-plays, *e. g.*, *Rowland's Godsonne* and *Attowel's jigge* in the Shirburn collection. This type of play in the sixteenth century was known as a ‘jig.’ *Attowel's jigge*, it is interesting to know, was one of the operettas, or *Singspiele*, that formed an important element in the repertory of the Elizabethan player companies that travelled in Germany. Is it not likely that in artificial creations of this sort we have reflected features of the song-dance of popular origin?

Miss Pound, commenting on the instances that she cites, says,—“There is evidence from recent times that in a few cases well-known Child pieces have been vitalized into dance songs.” She admits also that in the case of Mrs. Brown's *The Bonnie Birdie* or *The Maid and the Palmer* the refrains “might connect them with the dance.” Is it not more plausible to suppose that in the case of ballads in our times associated with dance or play-game we have to do with older ballad qualities, which in versions of solitary singers have lain dominant, but which come again to life when the ballad is restored to choral associations?

It must be admitted that among the ballads of the Child collection are represented quite different degrees of closeness of relations to the dance. Whereas in ballads like *Babylon* and *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* one feels the choral band not far away, in other instances, as in the case of the border ballads, we probably have to do with songs of another tradition, which have only been modified in external form under the influence of the songs used by the dancing ring. The continuity in tradition of heroic songs of days antedating the *carole* dance may be shown in many countries. In Germany Heusler¹⁹ cites the younger *Hilde-*

¹⁶ Gummere, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

¹⁷ *Do.*, 164.

¹⁸ Baskerville, *op. cit.*, 492.

¹⁹ Heusler, *Lied und Epos*, Dortmund, 1905, p. 4.

brandslied and the *Ermanrich's Tod* in comparison with the OHG. *Hildebrandslied* and the Eddic *Hamðismál* as showing 'how alliterative heroic songs of the eighth century have been preserved in the late middle ages with fundamental change in style and in versification but with so little change in outline and such agreement in details, that they may be said in the course of the intervening six or eight centuries, never to have ceased to exist as poems.' Evidence of a similar kind is supplied by Olrik²⁰ who shows how the concluding scene of the Danish heroic poem, the *Bjarkemål*, appears with modified form but unchanged content, in Faroe folk-song. In the same way in England there was evidently a continuous tradition in heroic poetry. The ballads of *Otterburn* and *Chevy Chase*, while dealing with events of later times, yet present not only situations and ideals, but even alliterative formulas surviving from the days before the Conquest. To quote a single instance, the Northumberland squire in *Chevy Chase* says:

But whylle I may my weppone welde,
I wylle not fayle both hart and hande,

just as four hundred years earlier, in the *Battle of Maldon*, the Old English poet tells us that the English warriors—

fæstlice wið ða fynd weredon þa hwile þe hi wæpna wealdan moston.

The influence of the ballad-form, however, may be seen by a comparison of different versions of these ballads. Take for instance the different versions of *The Battle of Otterburn*. In the manuscript version, A, features of older heroic songs are abundant, notably the alliterative lines. In the versions recorded later from Scotch oral tradition, the alliterative lines have been almost entirely superseded by lines in the well-known ballad style. If, as is probably the case, these ballads never served as song accompaniment to a dancing ring, or to put it another way, if these songs never found dramatic interpretation in the gestures and attitudes of a dancing chorus, in any event their external form has been modified under the influence of songs which, if prevailing opinion is correct, have taken the impress of the dancing ring.

This brief paper, it is hoped, offers good reasons for dissenting from the conclusion reached by Miss Pound in her latest contribu-

²⁰ A. Olrik, *Danmark's Heltedigtning*, Copenhagen, 1903, pp. 85-6.

tion to ballad literature. In attempting to dissociate the popular ballad from dance-origins, she is not only doing away with the one available plausible explanation of ballad-form, but she is disregarding evidence of a most definite kind.

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A LEGAL ASPECT OF BROWNING'S *THE RING AND THE BOOK*¹

Viewed by a lawyer, *The Ring and the Book* includes a twofold plot: the one aspect devoted to Pompilia and Caponsacchi; the other to Guido, his pecuniary motive, and its ultimate projection into a criminal act. But it is not Guido as a protagonist in a tragic drama involving duties and liabilities; it is Guido as he is brought to life, and laid bare, heart and soul, by the searching genius of the Pope, — for whose remarkable portrait Browning found practically no material in the Old Yellow Book. Delving in the dry documents, he gleaned two opposing versions: the first for Guido, prompting the monologue Half-Rome; the second for Pompilia, suggesting Other Half-Rome. *Tertium Quid* becomes a convenient compromise. But where, Browning must have asked himself, lay the truth? To rely upon the callous and pedantic lawyers, who sought to grope through a maze of precedent and technicality, was in no wise to be considered. Some spokesman of the veritable equities must be depicted, some superior intelligence that should penetrate through factional prejudice, through barriers of convention, and through persons and societies—into facts. It was this need that inspired the Pope, who is, in a real sense, Browning's mouthpiece — the Robert Browning, as one critic has indicated, "who sat upon the Papal throne."

The Pope's judicial method is worthy of intensive study. To appreciate his triumph in the case at bar, one can do no better than to consult the closing paragraph of a manuscript volume of old

¹For suggestive material I acknowledge my indebtedness to Charles W. Hodell's *The Old Yellow Book*; and to the following articles, also by Professor Hodell: *A Literary Mosaic* (*PMLA.*, Vol. xxiii, p. 510), *Browning's Old Yellow Book* (*Atlantic*, Vol. 101, p. 407), and Browning's "*Old Yellow Book*" (*The Nation*, Vol. 85, p. 299).